

# DOCUMENTARY VIDEOMAKING GUIDE

## UNDERSTANDING DOCUMENTARY AS A CONSTRUCT

### 1. Take responsibility for your version of reality--media is always “interpreting.”

- A. Alter setting slightly to suggest things or compose
  - Put in plants, rugs, posters, books, toys
  - Put in children playing, tools of craft
  - Lamps on or off
- B. Can show grimness, innocence, profundity
- C. Choose suggestive or evocative camera angles
- D. Compose foreground, background
- E. Editing: use sound effects, louder sound in editing, music, tones
- F. Shooting: shadows, no fill, harsh light, romantic backlight, people lounging around lazily or purposeful

### 2. Both in scripting and in shooting, know the ways of maintaining visual interest, effectively taping interviews.

- A. With talent
  - Keep down tension
  - Natural setting
  - No dark glasses
  - Two people or group talking animatedly
  - Group sitting close together
  - Seemingly 'eavesdropping'
  - Talent walking or standing, but no gravel crunch
- B. Shoot many cutaways, of what they are talking about, for ex., or people passing by, going in and out
- C. Shooting tactics
  - Decide in advance how much information to cover--get summary on tape right away from your talent
  - Establish one central visual theme
  - Observe eyeline match
  - Walking out of room is good transition
  - Use extreme close-ups
  - Shift locations, move camera, change angle
  - At end, tape nod shots-- both of interviewer and talent as if they were listening intently to the other; do this in close-up and over the shoulder, not with mouth moving.
  - Cutaways, cutaways, cutaways--film them at length and in great variety, and in close up

### 3. At moment of taping the interviews

- Do voice test for levels
- Do not overrehearse, only rehearse questions and blocking

Ask yourself, why talk to this person?  
Nod, do not interrupt interesting replies, listen intently  
Avoid verbal--"uh uh"  
Keep eye contact  
Take breaks, build confidence, be in charge, set tone for event  
Interviewer has fact sheet on card  
Ask simple short questions, unless it's your story, too  
Set final style--will we, in final tape, see interviewer, hear questions, see crew and mike?  
Silent cues among crew agreed on in advance, be unobtrusive  
Avoid yes/no questions

#### **4. Documentary ethics**

Let person speak at length  
Do not alter person's main stance by manipulative editing  
Respect and consult with talent about self-presentation  
It implies a good-faith contract, including forms of veto power  
Strategies for and problems with anonymity  
It's interesting but tricky to depict person under stress  
Audiences have special interest in a person doing work or craft  
Utilize people's need to tell a stranger  
Gain best results from genuine intimacy, knowing someone well  
Know problems of taping your own family--staying outside the family process via art  
Problems with taping lover, nude child, illegal matters

#### **5. Styles**

Narration in voice over  
Scripted, control  
Reductive, typage, selected images as illustration  
Boring, lacks authentic feel, authoritative (often male)  
When good, like an essay, know and trust "author"  
Bronowski, ASCENT OF MAN  
Mazruri, THE AFRICANS  
Joseph Campbell and Coppola on myth

##### **Cinema verite**

We can tell quality of relation with crew--love for subject who is filmed  
Sense of intimacy  
Time to get to know someone  
Interaction with camera people implied

##### **Showing social relations via environments --**

If you know the people well, you know the story behind the locale--the chair's history, what happens at that corner or outside that pizza parlor, the people's personalities, differences between the children in a family  
Poverty opens up into a textured environment

- Need to show uniqueness of individual
  - Accents and forms of expression
  - Body types
  - "Small" person's story or behind the scenes of important person
  - Texture of daily life, of moment
- Talking heads plus cutaways
  - People are authorities on own situation
  - Common social and political wisdom
  - Filmmaker often omits racism or sexism of people who are film's heroes
  - Emphasize unpleasant aspects of someone--ethics?? Political reasons for that??

## TASKS FOR THE VIDEOMAKER

### 1. Scripting stage

#### A. Conceptual tasks

- How to create visual variety
- How to create continuity
- Craft, imagination, creativity
- Planning

#### B. Shaping original focus

- Feasibility, length
- Goal, assignment, interest
  - How do i approach topic?
  - Where can i get pictures, images?
- Unifying focus?
- Original music--necessary for independent productions? Sound FX, Douglass listening room

#### C. Leave in contingency time

- for retakes, setting up lights, rain, illness, prepping and putting talent at ease, getting missing equipment

#### D. Preproduction planning sheets.

- Decide questions you will ask.
- Preinterview, plan visuals--where does visual potential lie?
- Decision making structure, will everyone shoot?
- Give and take, get advice. What goes around comes around.

### 2. Budget

- See form in books in library, include meals
- Use only good tape, about \$8-9 for videotape, always unused; about \$3-4 for audio cassette, always unused.

### 3. Remote production equipment checklist

- Be specific and list every item in suitcases, every plug, tape, cable, filters, gels, etc.

### 4. Production time table and written schedule

- Routing of cables
- Items, furniture, props, plants, posters -- to bring or to arrange at location
- Handling intrusions, potential noise, people on site, as well as hazards

Getting releases

Storage, transportation, return time

Charge and recharge batteries

**5. Story outline or treatment**

Organization of material thought out in advance.

What do we want to see and hear at each point in the program?

There is a useful predictability of documentary format--can estimate kinds of cutaways, visual variety, change of angle

Show a process, family, snapshots, etc

Pace

Music, ambient sound -- slides, cassettes

**6. Daily production script**

Cut and paste for location or talent

Shoot all related material at once

**7. Interview questions**

Focus on the person's story or passion

Have more questions than you will need

Get release forms

**8. Remote location survey**

Visit under conditions similar to shoot

Do a sketch

Anticipate camera viewpoints

What kinds of lights, gels, filters?

Audio characteristics of that space

Electrical outlets, what to turn off (frig), where cables needed--do diagram

**9. Shooting procedure**

Shoot wide shots, outdoor shots first

Punctuality, your professional reputation and demeanor

Shoot in short sections

Label tapes

Do field shot log

**10. Keep a diary during the shoot, a journal of what happened**

**11. Do a complete log of shots, for editing**

Based on field shot log, tell content of each shot

On TV look at footage, tell kind of shot--cu, ms,ls, and what kind of

Camera movement or movement in frame. What's on sound track?

Tell what's bad, good, passable.

Never use out of focus shots, or awkward camera movt

**12. Compose a final version on paper first, with an edit shot list**

Planned audio edits--from where, length, words

Planned video edits--from where, time

Digital production

On line production -- need to learn to use time code